

Labour's long domination of Welsh politics. Is it a problem?

A celebration was held last year to mark Labour's achievement in holding a majority of Welsh seats in Parliament at Westminster for 100 years. Nor has it been out of Government in Cardiff Bay in the 24 years since the Assembly (now Senedd) was created, possibly the longest period of political domination of one territory by one party anywhere in the world, even if for much of that time another party – the Conservatives – have held power nationally in the UK. Evidently, this has the freely expressed wish of the people of Wales over a long time but could it also be a problem?

We should ask what have we to show for this prolonged period of dominance? Wales has long been irredeemably stuck near the bottom of UK economic tables, usually only above one British region, the North East, which recent research suggests is exceeded in its levels of poverty by only one country in the *advanced* world – Greece. The same is almost certainly true of Wales.

We have poor educational performance in our schools, coming behind the other UK countries in the Pisa league tables – a sometimes contested measure but the only one we have. Wales lacks an elite university, the best performer – Cardiff – coming out in the mid-20s in the tables produced each year rating Britain's universities. Our newer institutions are invariably placed in the bottom third or even fifth of the 150 strong list.

We have high levels of economic inactivity, and poor health and social conditions compared with other UK regions. We have a growing problem with drug taking. In Neath, a once proud town dating back to Roman times, heroin is reported to have taken hold of many desperate individuals, resulting in the death of 25 people in 2021, the latest year for which we have figures from drug poisoning. The problem is no different in other Valley authorities, or indeed in our second city, Swansea, which has also seen outbreaks within the past year of serious acts of rioting and lawlessness.

We have low levels of research investment and activity in industry, weak export performance, and an over-dependence on small and micro businesses. Only one Welsh-based company features in the FTSE100, and fewer than 10 are listed on the Aim market. Few Welsh-owned businesses trade actively across the UK and the rest of the world. Multinationals have departed from Wales over the past few decades, reversing the inward flow which characterised the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Many have gone overseas but others have retrenched to other parts of Britain, the latest example being 2Sisters which announced in early 2023 that it was quitting Llangefni with the loss of 700 jobs. Wales has a higher proportion of its workforce in public sector jobs, including health and education than the UK, and a lower proportion in the main wealth-creating occupations such as finance.

Some seek to excuse this underperformance on the long periods during which Conservative governments have held sway, with the result that in the 78 years since WW2 Labour has been in power in Westminster only for a period of 30 years – still close to 40 per cent of the time. This can hardly be more than a partial explanation. Badly as Wales was affected by closures in mining and other heavy industries, there has been a long history of inward investment. Other

regions that were once dependent on coal, such as South Yorkshire, have, according to academic research from Hallam University, recovered to a much greater extent than Wales from the changes in industry since the 1980s.

It is not a record we can dismiss as simply correctable by the further injection of vast sums of money into infrastructure, housing, or increased levels of wages and social provision. Wales received during Britain's membership of the EU large amounts of money which has resulted in new roads, railways and bridges and other developments across the country, including investment in local facilities and institutions. The jumpstart this was meant to bring has not happened, the impact quickly petering out like earlier attempts to compensate for the loss of older industries.

Nor can we be confident that we can at least cite our cultural offerings as evidence of a strong Wales. WNO has had to cut back its programming because of Arts Council of England cuts, and just as worryingly the pipeline of internationally renowned singers from Geraint Evans, Gwyneth Jones, Dennis O'Neill, Margaret Price, Gwynne Howell, Stuart Burrows, Anne Evans, Rebecca Evans, to Bryn Terfel seems to have dried up. What are the names of the new artists emerging in high culture to follow on from the crop of post war years? Who are the new Welsh conductors, and composers to follow William Matthias, Alun Hoddinott and Grace Williams?

The same is true of popular culture. Who among Welsh popular performers could take a season in one of Las Vegas's resort hotels, as did Tom Jones or Shirley Bassey. Where are the pop groups following in the slipstream of Manic Street Preachers, Super Furry Animals or Stereophonics? And in art who are the successors to such giants as Kyffin Williams, Shani Rhys James, and Ceri Richards. We are trading on our past in so many fields of endeavour.

And then there is the language. Contrary to expectations, the Welsh language is languishing, dropping to its lowest number for centuries in the most recent census despite 30 years or more of well-funded provision of bilingual and Welsh - medium education. For every two Welsh speakers in 1911 there is now one, with the total number of speakers, already generously represented in successive censuses likely on current trends to drop to below 500,000 in 2031. We were meant to be heading towards 1m in 2050.

It was not meant to be like this when a new era supposedly dawned in September 1999 and elected Welsh representatives were put in charge of Welsh industry, health services, education, and agriculture. In an earlier era, the appointment of a Secretary of State for Wales in 1964, putting Wales on the same basis as Scotland and Northern Ireland was meant to bring Welsh expertise to solving Welsh problems. Dynamism not malaise was what we expected from the new century and our new institutions. Many of us have campaigned for Welsh devolution for years using the argument that if Welsh people could have a bigger say in running their own affairs, they could, with their better understanding of the issues and policies and imbued with Welsh social thinking, revive the Welsh economy and improve the lot of Welsh people.

Yet, while the Assembly started with hope and attracted high-profile former Westminster MPs, including former Cabinet ministers and party leaders, Rhodri Morgan and Alun Michael from Labour, and Dafydd Wigley and Cynog Dafis from

Plaid Cymru among them, the quality of the intake has declined, and it has now – like county councils of old – become instead a stepping stone the other way to the House of Commons. Plaid Cymru spokesman Rhun ap Iorwerth is the latest hoping to tread this path, following Glyn Davies, Alun Cairns, Antionette Sandbach, and David Davies.

The stasis that pervades Welsh politics is made worse by the complete absence of serious media, unlike Ireland or Scotland. The discussions of Welsh issues that once featured in the Welsh press, and especially the Western Mail, have now been replaced by blanket coverage of crime, celebrity, rugby and football on news websites controlled largely by Reach, the dominant Welsh press group. A recent attempt to start a new newspaper – the National – failed. Another new initiative nation.cymru is not a curated news medium but largely an opinion site in which contributors highlight the issues currently exercising them.

My contention is that the lack of economic and political pluralism has been the root cause of this depressing picture. Unpopular as it may be to say so, no young person in Wales who aspires to hold political office in Wales would join any other party than Labour – after all where would such a choice lead – certainly not to hope of office in Wales at present. Having taken the only sensible career option, few will seek to breach the prevailing consensus. Ambitious people with centre or centre-right views will know their best chance of a rewarding political career will be through representing an English constituency at Westminster. Plaid Cymru, which seems to see itself as an influencer rather than a potential governing party has accepted a role supporting Labour Welsh governments. In broader policy terms it is converging with the Greens. The Liberals are a much-diminished force, offering few original ideas for the Welsh context. Many able individuals have consequently been lost to Welsh political life and debate because they prefer not to belong to the monopoly political group.

The danger is that new radical ideas are not just never adopted; they are never brought forward in the first place. Instead we are left with small-scale initiatives from the Senedd – regulation of tattoo parlours and policies that in a business context – a ban on new roads – that can only be seen as anti-growth. Tata, which has extensive interests in Wales is considering a new car battery plant and a generation ago Wales would have been clamouring for this. Tata has set its sights on our more prosperous neighbours in Somerset and one can see why.

The problem has got worse as the Big Tent nature of Welsh politics has grown to include previously semi-independent organisations. In the decades before devolution, in the days of the quangos which we all so wanted to eliminate, there were alternative sources presenting ideas, commissioning reports, implementing actions. These bodies were able to include within their membership individuals who had succeeded in their chosen fields thereby bringing a diversity of ideas. One of the early acts of the Assembly, however, was to take in-house the Welsh Development Agency (a well-recognised brand around the world), the long-established Wales Tourist Board, and Education and Learning Wales, subjecting them all as a result to a civil service mentality at odds with the innovative approach that was needed.

Over recent years the question why nations fail has been subjected to considerable academic research and the conclusions that some of these studies

have reached apply neatly to Wales. Political and economic plurality both play a crucial role. Unless there is scope for new people with fresh ideas to move through society and join or displace existing elites, and unless new economic actors can be allowed to come to the fore replacing existing systems that are faltering, the result is ossification.

The contrasting fortunes of England and Spain from the 16th to the 20th century demonstrates this, a flexible power constantly renewing itself and allowing new men to rise to the top replacing one that preserved for an autocratic monarchy its position at the top of the economic and social pyramid. This is far removed from Wales but on a micro scale the unchanging Welsh political environment produces the same results. There is no all-embracing discussion in Wales as to whether the economic and social policies the Welsh Government controls are working or around the business climate and incentives needed to produce successful enterprises.

When one party dominates there will inevitably be a reluctance to criticise policy not just by the party's politicians and supporters but by the large number of voluntary and charitable organisations dependent on Government funding, extending even to the business community as well. At worse this can lead to cronyism, and at worst, though not the case so far in Wales, to corruption.

Among the public it can also lead to apathy and disengagement. The level of knowledge of the Senedd's responsibilities is disturbing, evidence suggesting it took the pandemic to bring home to people that the Senedd was the overall health authority. In the six elections to Assembly and Senedd since 1999 turnout has never exceeded 50 per cent, many perhaps concluding their vote would not count. Turnover at the first election in 1999 was 46 per cent; in 2021 it was 46.6 per cent. This is not the case with Parliamentary elections where turn-out is usually in the high sixties or low seventies.

Few would deny here are plenty of encouraging developments taking place. The Welsh Government has brought forward some new social legislation that has been copied in other parts of the UK and has introduced some valuable new environmental regulations. There has been some devolution of jobs and administration from Cardiff Bay to other parts of Wales.

In the business arena the fintech industry is growing in Cardiff, though the city remains much smaller as a financial services sector than neighbouring Bristol, Leeds or Manchester and is dwarfed by Edinburgh. Funds under management in Scotland amount to £690bn and the sector supports 145,000 jobs. There is also a thriving biomedical presence in south east Wales and other high-tech enterprises such as Newport Wafer Fab (currently involved in a tug-of-war between the British Government and its Chinese owners) and not certain of survival. There has been a revival across Wales in craft food and other rural enterprises though it remains a struggle to retain the big food processing companies such as 2Sisters or Kingsmill, another recent departee.

The contribution being made, however, by Welsh businesspeople to debates about the economy and their involvement in policy formulation has greatly diminished. In the decades after the WW2 governments of both stripes drew on the expertise of prominent business individuals such as Sir Melvyn Rosser, Sir Alfred Nicholas, Sir Julian Hodge, Fred Cartwright, and many others. These were

figures were well-represented in the press and debates of the day on the directions Wales should take.

Their involvement coincided with the introduction into Wales of a wide range of new industries and overseas investors, and a re-orientation of the Welsh economy from its previous dependence on coal, iron and steel and other heavy industrial sectors. Who are their equivalents today? Where are the new ideas for creating a prosperous Welsh economy coming from? How can the interests of employers and employees be fully represented in the absence of such outside voices?

Maybe Freeports will unlock potential further West, maybe the vast amounts spent on creating the dual carriageway A465 from Hereford to Llandarcy will revive the Heads of the Valleys, maybe the South Wales Metro will transform into prosperity the whole of the Cardiff region from Bridgend to Monmouth and north to Merthyr Tydfil and Ebbw Vale and not just the city and its immediate environs. But where are the ideas to take advantage of these new developments or to stop the slow erosion of Wales's importance within the United Kingdom – we now represent fewer than 5 per cent of the UK population because of the continuing outflow of young people, and Welsh birth rates will likely continue to undershoot those for Britain as a whole.

These views not meant to be pro or anti any political party but out of concern for what it means for Wales. Parties get tired and complacent and reluctant to think in unconventional ways – as we can all see in the case of the current Government at Westminster, resulting in a big majority in latest polls to suggest a new administration is needed. Why should Wales be different? How can we ensure new ideas not always from the same standpoint are fed into the national bloodstream?

There is no easy solution. (My own best efforts to chart a way forward are contained in a paper entitled Rewiring Wales). However, is it a situation in our affairs that could usefully be addressed within the Cymmrodorion, as it might have been in the society in earlier times? Many people in Wales feel they do not have a stake in the future of the country or an opportunity to influence policy and so sit passively to one side so perhaps the society could rise to the challenge of creating such a forum. A debate could take several forms. We could simply get together to hear experts talk on these issues but that might not take matters further. Instead, why not draw on the resources of the membership to try to collate a Cymmrodorion response to some of the issues highlighted above, offering a Cymmrodorion view and ideas on what might be done?

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The detail may be bewildering, but it's not hard to see why all this happened. In any political system, the long dominance of one political

party tends to breed complacency, arrogance and worse, because it no longer fears embarrassment or defeat.

We've seen that under this UK Conservative government, and under New Labour and the Thatcher-Major government as well. It happens a good deal in big cities run by Labour.

Being in power with weak opposition and for far too long tends to corrupt minds. Under Sturgeon, Scotland was a one-party state. Politics became pantomime, as it would when there is zero chance you'll actually lose an election and you hold nearly every seat and Labour is left with one.

Some of that SNP success is undoubtedly down to the political talents of the likes of Salmond and Sturgeon, and the frustration many Scots rightly felt about rule by successive English-dominated Tory governments and, above all, Brexit.

Yet it's also down to Labour and the other unionist parties' failure to offer something satisfactory and appealing to the Scottish voter. Once so dominant, Labour's decline in Scotland predates Sturgeon's rule, and was in its turn also caused by the same kind of complacency and neglect that has led to so much trouble now for the SNP.

It seems clear, from the perspective of a quarter century of devolution, that Labour took Scotland for granted, and assumed that devolution, the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament and Donald Dewar were all that was needed to keep the nation happy.